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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE PESSIMISTIC ON WAY FORWARD IN CHINA

REF: A. SECSTATE 325020

[1](#)B. VAT 03820

[1](#)C. SECSTATE 222664 (NOTAL)

[1](#)D. VAT 4649

Classified By: Ambassador Jim Nicholson for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In a December 3 meeting, Vatican Office Director for China Gianfranco Rota-Graziosi was pessimistic on prospects for progress on human rights and religious freedom in China. He noted continuing persecution of both the underground Catholic Church and the government-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), and said the Vatican finds it hard to keep up to date with the frequent arrests of Catholics. The Holy See has no plans for a change in strategy toward China, and Rota-Graziosi mentioned in this regard the Vatican's low-key approach to the Dalai Lama and its differences with the activist, U.S.-based Cardinal Kung Foundation. Despite his predictions of limited progress, Rota-Graziosi called for continuing U.S. and international pressure on China to abide by international human rights agreements and norms on religious freedom. End Summary.

Persecution of State-Sponsored Church...

[1](#)2. (C) In a December 3 meeting with Poloff, Vatican Office Director for China Gianfranco Rota-Graziosi saw little cause of optimism regarding human rights and religious freedom in China. He noted continuing persecution of both the underground Catholic Church and the state-supervised Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA). In fact, Rota-Graziosi said, he felt in many ways conditions were deteriorating, even for the CPA community. In addition to manipulation of CPA bishops, elections and state control over seminaries, each CPA bishop essentially lived under house arrest, according to Rota-Graziosi, with a government aide always at his side, attending all of his meetings and reporting to the government. On the positive side, Rota-Graziosi did note more opportunities for CPA seminarians to study abroad.

...and Underground Catholics

[1](#)3. (C) Rota-Graziosi's reaction to media reports of recent arrests of underground Church members was muted. He said that such arrests were so commonplace that it was difficult to keep track of them. According to Rota-Graziosi, all underground bishops were currently being detained in some way. Some were in prison, some kept in police houses, and still others had had no contact with the Holy See for two to four years. The Holy See had not set out to develop the underground Church, he noted. The goal had always been and would always be to have a unified Church out in the open -- a "visible sign" for all people. Given China's political situation, however, the Vatican had to live with the realities of the split Catholic Church in China for the time being.

Cardinal Kung Foundation

[1](#)4. (C) Rota-Graziosi allowed that the publicizing of religious freedom abuses in China by the U.S.-based Cardinal Kung Foundation was helpful. But he noted that the NGO had no working relationship with the Vatican. The Kung Foundation focuses its advocacy efforts on the underground Church and disagrees with the Vatican's strategy of promoting reconciliation between the official and state-run churches. According to Rota-Graziosi, the Foundation favors a more aggressive approach than the Holy See can take. Despite serious disagreements, he acknowledged the importance of the voice the Kung Foundation gave to those suffering in the underground Church.

15. (SBU) We turned next to the recent meeting between the Pope and the Dalai Lama, which was downplayed in official Vatican media and referred to as merely a religious courtesy call by the Vatican spokesman. Rota-Graziosi told us that the Vatican & doesn't want to make trouble with China or complicate China's relationship with the Dalai Lama on such occasions, but added that the treatment of the visit was consistent with that of previous meetings. He said the Pope always receives the Dalai Lama as a religious leader, rather than a politician-in-exile.

Continued Pressure Needed

16. (C) Rota-Graziosi was unaware of the most recent developments in the EU-China dialogue on human rights (ref a), but called for continuing pressure by the international community -- and especially the U.S. -- on China to live up to international commitments and norms for human rights and religious freedom. He cautioned the U.S. against intervening on specific religious freedom cases, lest such efforts produce a government backlash; however, he said he did not think China was feeling too much international pressure in general at the moment.

Comment: Pessimism Rules the Day

17. (C) Rota-Graziosi's outlook was more pessimistic than views we have heard recently from other Holy See officials (ref b). He sees few options for Vatican action in China. "Anything we do in China is 50 percent advantage, 50 percent disadvantage," he said. If the Holy See pushes harder for religious freedom, there is likely to be a backlash; if it stays mute, then more Catholics will be persecuted under a veil of silence. Fretting about a communist mentality that had taken generations to develop, he said it would take "generations, or even centuries" to change it. Further, he said, the Holy See is simply not a presence in the lives of Chinese Catholics -- or Asians in general -- as it is in the West, thus limiting the Vatican's potential impact. He did not expect concrete improvement stemming from the informal trip last summer of Washington Cardinal McCarrick to China (ref c). Rota-Graziosi's outlook, perhaps jaded by the dashed expectations of the past couple of years when repeated hints of openings have brought no significant change from the PRC, will likely have an influence on the thinking of new Vatican Foreign Minister Lajolo, who comes to his post without substantial Asian experience (ref d), but who regards the relationship with China as one of his top four priorities.

Nicholson

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